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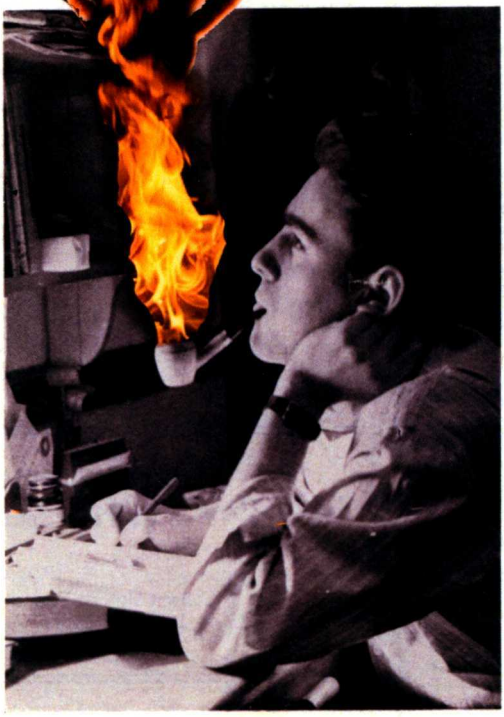

What is Our "Road to Survival?"

JANUARY
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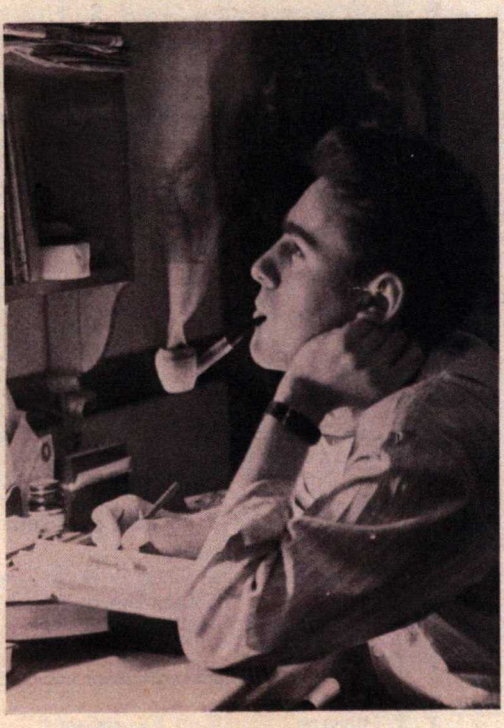
THE GLEANER

NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE

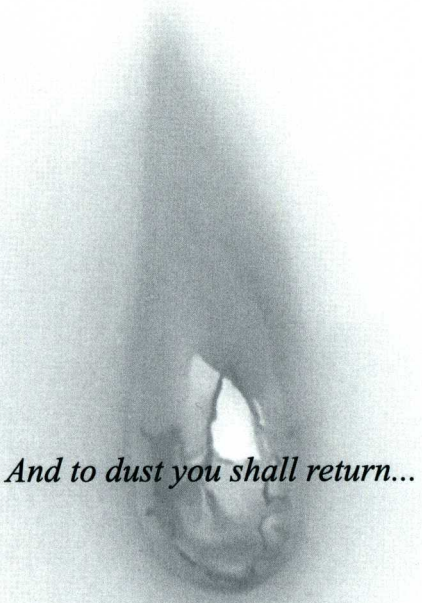


What is Our "Road to Survival?" -- Page 7

The Gleaner is a theme-based literary journal edited by the undergraduate students at Delaware Valley University.

We showcase all forms of written work as well as artwork and photography pieces.

This year's theme is *From the Ashes.*



And to dust you shall return...

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DECOMPOSITION
A PRACTICAL PROCESS

BY ROBIN LYONS

The end had come in an instant.

There was a bright flash of lights, the blaring of horns, and then it was all dark. Soon she found for herself a new type of awareness, an awareness above awareness, where she saw herself, but was still confined to herself.

She was lying on the side of a path of smooth, hard stone. The type of path that the giant machines run back and forth on. And when she tried to move, she couldn't. It was quite like being cold, and laying in snow. Or the chill of fear. Or the bite of an empty stomach. Or holding your breath. It was then she understood she was no longer breathing.

And when she realized she wasn't quite seeing or hearing or feeling or smelling or tasting, but just sensing, a great panic took over her. She realized what had happened to her. She realized what was going on.

She was dead.

Desperately she tried to paw at the ground with her hooves, trying to get up, but she couldn't move. And she panicked some more. She tried to bleat out, "Help me! Help me!" but of course, nothing came out.

"Help me, help me…" her voice trailed off. She muttered there into the ether, her voice rasping on the cold mist of the spring night.

On the side of a manmade road, the bright flashes of cars whizzing by, she lay there, still and dead. Grasping onto hope that she could walk again. That she could taste the fresh grass again. That she

could lie in the fields again. She never let it go.

Soon the sun was rising, and she continued her muttering into the early morning.

"Help, help, help…"

"Oh, quit your whining," a voice said, cutting through the stagnation.

"What? Hello? Where are you? Who are you?" she called.

"I'm right here."

"A mushroom? Mushrooms do not speak."

"Do we not? Then how am I talking to you?"

Its voice wasn't quite like her bleats, or the song of birds. It didn't feel like a sound at all. More like a tingling feeling that she interpreted into words. She felt it creep onto her being and slowly begin to spread.

"I suppose it doesn't matter," she reasoned, "but I need you to help me! I think that I have died."

The last word she spoke she seemed afraid to say out loud, like a dirty secret that she didn't want to share.

"Death, right. That is what you call it. Well, I'm afraid there's no going back. Only forward. I've come to help you along."

"No! You see, I can still sense. I can still speak. There must be-"

"Quiet! I have passed countless souls along. I am frankly tired of these discussions. You can sense and speak because you have not let go. You are dead. It is better to-"

Now, she cut the mushroom off. In a harsh rasp, her being cried out again into the vast emptiness, reverberating off of all the things that lived in a vengeful, desperate cry. "This isn't death! I swear it! Death is the end! I am not at the end of it all, clearly! I need to live again! I need to walk again! I need to breathe again! Please!"

At this, the mushroom did not say anything. It let her stir there as it creeped along her body, continuing to consume.

"Am I alone again," she wept, "Alone in this cold hell?"

The mushroom felt pity.

"I am still here. I need to tell you something important, and I need you to listen."

"Fine. There's nothing left I can do."

The mushroom stretched its mycelium tendrils and stopped eating for a moment, taking a rest before speaking.

"As I've said, I have passed countless souls along. That's what mushrooms do, of course. And they speak to me. They say they aren't ready. They say that death is supposed to be the end. They grasp their souls for eternity, not sure whether to wish for void or to wish to walk again. I tell you this; both of these are foolish options, and they are not possible. Leave them alone."

A sharp, sad pain rang through her spirit at the utterance of this. Now, more than ever, she felt frozen. If there was no void, and no resurrection, what then? What is left? Is it just this cold, breathless feeling, forever?

As if to answer her desperate question, the mushroom continued. "We often ponder what comes after death. The answer is life. And after life there is death, and after death there is life. You will break down, as I am doing to you now, into millions and billions of tiny little pieces.

Some will become a part of me, my ancient self, and some into the soil, and some into the air, and some into the water, and some into the trees, and some into the grass, and some into the worms, and some into the birds, and some into more deer, like yourself. And those pieces will experience life again, just one part of a living thing."

The words flowed through her. It felt like a cool respite, a full feeling in her spirit, like… breath! It felt like breath!

She wondered, then, "Well, what is death? What am I doing now?"

"Holding on, dear. You will not let go of the being you were, even as that being falls away back into the dust of the earth. Death itself is not the end of all things–it is the end of the you that was. The you that is now will continue on forever and ever, so long as life continues somewhere in time."

Now she felt warm, as if the sun was on her skin. No–it really did feel like the sun on her skin. And though she still could not see or hear, she absolutely tasted, and felt, and smelled. It wasn't quite the same, but it was very familiar. Her senses were sparking to life again, slowly but surely, like a river unthawing and trickling in the early spring. A euphoric peace soothed her. If she could smile, she would be smiling, her grin able to stretch across the entire world that she once knew, grateful for what she was able to experience in the past.

"Then, when will it all end? When will life end?" she mused, her questions not so desperate as before.

The mushroom communicated something like a sigh. "I may be old, but not so old as to have that knowledge. But I do have a hunch. I do not think life will end until time ends. Just as, impossibly almost, I could cross the smooth stone path to get to you, I think life can break free across the vast desert of this universe into wherever it can find a home. To put it simply, we have a lot of time."

"A lot of time to breathe."

"A lot of time to eat."

"A lot of time to lie down."

"A lot of time to talk."

"A lot of time to dance and sing."

"A lot of time to play."

"A lot of time to love."

"A lot of time to hurt."

"A lot of time to be sad."

"A lot of time to be angry."

"A lot of time to cry."

"A lot of time to shout."

"A lot of time to experience."

"A near infinite amount of time to experience–just experience–the fullness of this phenomenon. The phenomenon of life and death. The eternal cycle of living."

For a while they sat there in silence, the mushroom slowly eating, the sun rising to its peak, over the entire landscape. A soft wind blew quietly through the trees and grass, and the human machines chose not to run down the smooth stone path for some time.

Within time the mushroom–the deer--the mushroom–realized it had been talking to itself. She had finally let go. She was here now, onto the next life.

IN THE BELLY OF THE OWL

BY MOUSE MOSELEY

I am twitching love
Tomorrow I will be bones

I will come out whole
And changed again

Love is always changing
Moving, twitching, lunging

Lurching towards tomorrow
I will leave the way I came

Up and out and changed
I will leave the way I came

Past the beak and this time
It won't hurt

I will rest forever in fields
My non-eyes closed

Against the breeze
Rustling my non-fur

Like forever
When forever means

The next gust of wind
Sends me careening

A VULTURE'S BURDEN

BY CAROLINE HONSEL

I've grown used to the smell of rot.

A hot breeze carries the marinating stench of decay through the trees that I'm perched within, reminding me of the empty feeling in the pit of my stomach.

It's been a week or so since my last meal, and the ripe, metallic tang boiling in the summer's heat makes it easy to find my next. Though I would have preferred something a bit fresher, this should suffice.

It didn't take long before I found the source. You were lying on the side of the road. Your small body was contorted in more ways than one. One antler stuck out of your head, while only a stump remained of the other. Your front leg was bent inwards, and your forehead was nearly touching your spine.

You must have been dead for several hours, or so it smells. The sun has scorched your skin to the asphalt and your stomach has begun to bloat. The blood from your head dripped down into your eyes. Bulging, red ones that looked at me as I approached your stiff body.

I never understood why deer don't close their eyes when they die. Why must you insist on seeing everything? I can't imagine it does you any good.

My talons begin to tear at your body as if they have a mind of their own. Sinking into your skin, shredding layers of tender flesh, ripping away at viscera—this has all become routine.

Shifting downwards, I nuzzle my featherless head into the opening I've created for myself. My beak slices through the meat of your body and your blood drips down my throat like warm honey. You taste like sweet ambition and carelessness.

With each chunk of you I swallow, a familiar sensation starts to weigh on my body. I imagine how a fledging would feel after leaving the nest far too early and flapping its arms far too late. It's a heavy, tiresome feeling that seeps into my body regardless of what I consume.

I pull my head out from you to look at the mess I've created.

Your eyes were still open, glazed over and foggy. Blood has started to pool beneath you from the goreish cavity I left in your body. Your innards are on display for anyone to see.

It should feel wrong to leave you in such a state, but I don't particularly care.

Flies begin to circle your corpse, and the local crows have started to show their interest in my leftovers. I ruffle my feathers and pull myself away from your corpse, allowing the others to indulge in their fill.

Despite the pressure in my body, I beat my wings. They take me far away from your corpse, but you remain with me. It's taxing. I've started to believe that one day I won't be able to lift my wings above my head.

My body is cumbered by the weight of life, and I fear one day it will be the death of me.

And yet, I must eat.

FORETHOUGHT

BY MOUSE MOSELEY

Prometheus is an admirer of the proverb. Or he will be, when the word *proverb* is popularized. For now, he makes do with *motto*, though it is not the same. Compare the two for yourself. Examine the syllables in your mouth and determine which is better: *Proverbum. Muttum*. Send them back and forth over your tongue, behind your teeth, across your lips and decide which you prefer. Prometheus is pro *Proverbum*, and thus ahead of his time. As always. Forethought is Prometheus' downfall. He knows this, he sees this. And he knows that the proverb will well outlive him- has already outlived him, will continue to do so. It is impressive to outlive an immortal, especially one that has not yet died.

Prometheus does not belong to anyone. There were titans and then there were gods, and now there are men and gods and the titans are…well. Sometimes when he makes a joke a cloud reaches its tendril fingers down to bridge the sky with the earth and Prometheus hears his brother chuckle. Atlas's laughter lives and dies where he is chained under the sky, the same way Menoetius's rash passion has been expelled to the box of Tartarus with the traits of so many others he can never see again. This box, unlike another, will never be pried open no matter how the curiosity pries at his edges. The Titans got what was coming to them. He knows what is coming to him.

Maybe this is why he is so often chosen for mediation between men and gods, the best negotiator is the one who has no real stakes to contend with after the outcome. Prometheus is no one and yet very aware of …something. Of what, he's not telling.

Had his twin Epimetheus been asked, he would have suggested a different judge for the trials between man and god. His brother remembers what the gods do not. His brother remembers the clay on Prometheus's hands and tunic the day everything changed. He remembers the night he came home just before the new god wrought the dawn upon the sky, nose red with the cold that came from digging in silt late into the frigid night. His eyes shone like they never had before.

"There is something in the look of you," Epimetheus said. "There is something in your eyes."

Prometheus pulled his brother into himself, encircling him with his arms and dirtying Epimetheus's clothes with the labor of creation. "They will call them constellations."

Epimetheus would divulge all of his secrets to the world if only he knew them- but could or will be is not where he specializes, and so Prometheus keeps his secrets. They are worth nothing to anyone but himself, in any case. Once, Epimetheus asked him which of them came first when he couldn't sort his own memories from their mother's tale of their birth, which never mentioned the two of them apart.

"I could not tell you, my brother," Prometheus says. "Even if I existed while you were nothing, I knew you were coming. I knew you would be. Or I knew you were. I cannot remember now. I am not a sequential man."

In any case, it didn't matter. One of them could not exist without the other. Yet they do. They manage to go long, long whiles without each other.

Epimetheus does not visit him after his last great trick or during the winding stretch of his sentence. He knows that, at least partially, his brother is staying away for the sake of his wife. Pandora has made enough trouble for herself, she is so new and has already doomed so many. She cannot afford to be seen showing him compassion, her creators would never show her the same. The gods prefer to play with what they've begotten until their creations stumble into their own downfall. The last thing Prometheus wants is to stain their reputation with his own. There is something deep inside him, hidden within his own tightly sealed jar, that hopes one day he will be worth the consequences.

Prometheus awaits the eagle.

The blade of its beak rips into his abdomen, nudges apart his ribs and tears through the viscera to get to its prize. Often, it digs too far. The lining of his stomach does not regrow as fast and the bile sizzles the rest of his organs as it leaks around the cavity. Sometimes his skin doesn't understand the decree, either. He hates those days. It is not the smell of his flayed abdomen festering in the sun that he languishes, but rather the brevity of the eagle's meal when it doesn't have to spend the time tearing him open to feast.

Prometheus awaits the eagle.

He thinks upon Zeus's choice of organ with fondness. He could have chosen the fat and bones of his body as sacrifice, the same offerings Prometheus tricked the gods into receiving from mankind. He is glad that the bird gets to taste the decadence of the best cut of meat he has to offer. Sometimes he aches for it to indulge, to consume more than part of his liver. He knows if the bird eats it whole there will be nothing to grow back the next day; he knows that the bird will have to eat another piece of him or go hungry. The rest of him does not regrow. Perhaps the only way to kill an immortal is to eat him piece by piece. He would not be able to sustain the bird indefinitely as he can now. He aches that it does not know gluttony, but he does not want the bird to go hungry.

He remembers making mankind from clay, the silt slipping from his fingers as he placed the first woman into Athena's palms and watched as she breathed life into her. She sat in the palm of the goddess's hand while blood rushed through her for the first time and stared up at the stars. He thought to himself: this is what love feels like. He would have done anything for them. He formed them with his own two hands, he stole the fire back for them, he made sure they had the choicest cuts of meat to sear over the criminal embers.

Prometheus awaits the eagle

He recounts the constellations.

This is what love feels like.

PALIMPSEST

BY CHARLIE ROLLER

I am a living palimpsest,
each version of me written over the last
but never fully erased.

Sometimes in dreams,
I catch glimpses of the girl who collected dead caterpillars,
pressed them to her heart,
believing she could bring them back
through wishes and hugs.

Each morning mirror shows a new face
layered over yesterday's,
like tree rings expanding,
like sediment building future mountains.

My mother's laugh erupts
from my throat unexpectedly—
I thought I'd lost it but here it is,
preserved in some deep amber of memory.

We are all haunted houses,
but our ghosts are ourselves:
the child's scraped knees,
the student's caffeine jitters,
the lover's first heartbreak,
the parent's sleepless vigil.

Each breath rewrites us,
but nothing is lost—
only transformed,
like stars collapsing
into the matter
of new constellations.

WAIT

BY ASHLEY LYONS

There's a stop sign at the corner of my street
that always reminds me of Las Vegas.

I've never been to Nevada,
but I imagine somewhere, at the edge of town,
on the corner of a dark street,
there's a lonely stop sign with a single
streetlight lingering above it, casting a pale circle
of weak, white light over the asphalt.

I bet, together, they wonder why they
couldn't have ended up in a busier part of town,
somewhere more exciting, with every color
of neon light and plenty of people to stop
and wait
just a second.

They have no one but each other for company
most nights, and they don't usually mind
so much, but they've run out of things to
talk about
all their conversations are repeats, broken Las
Vegas record—just push play.

Their silence is intimate, comfortable, familiar,
but secretly, they want something more:
passion, heat, surprise, novelty
the anxious sting of not knowing what comes next.

Most nights, they just sit beside each other,
the stop sign at the corner
and the streetlight above.

And they wait

And they wait

And

they

wait.

THE TRIAL OF CARTER HALE

BY WILLIAM AVERILL

73 days, 11 hours, 49 minutes, and 5 seconds: this was the length of time that Captain Carter Hale of the United States Space Force had spent in orbit around Earth's only natural satellite. Despite his prestigious title, Captain Hale resembled anything but a character out of *Star Trek*, and his ship was no *Enterprise*. He lived almost alone – save for the brief exchanges he would share with his shift switch-off, Mark Callahan – on board the USSF *Chance Hallman*, one of three spacecraft belonging to the Space Force's SENTINEL Program.

The USSF maintained these SENTINEL craft in an equilaterally triangular pattern, in orbit around the Lunar equator. The goal of these craft was to monitor Lunar space for hazards, primarily in the form of spaceborne debris, asteroids, and Near-Earth Objects, to provide forewarning and defensive capabilities to surface bases below. Each SENTINEL was outfitted with five KKVs, or kinetic kill vehicles – blisteringly fast guided impactors that worked similarly to missiles – capable of reducing the most likely threats to dust. This monitoring had to be performed, in accordance with Earth's days, 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Hale would swap shifts with Callahan every twelve hours, exercise for three, leisure for one, and sleep for eight, ad nauseum. It was now nearing Hale's shift.

He floated from his quarters out into the central hallway, dimly lit by a single overhead light and various LEDs on the mind-bogglingly complex control panels and electrical systems surrounding virtually his every direction. Hale grabbed hold of the guidance bars, anchoring himself and crawling up to the dressing quarters. Removing his cotton rest garments, folding them, and setting them on a holding hook, Hale closed the quarters' seal and began to wipe himself down with an individually packaged cleaning rag, from head-to-toe. Traditional showers were impossible in these conditions, as not only would the water coagulate and float, it would also risk exposing the ship's systems should it seep out. He wrung the rag out into the dressing room's funnel-like toilet, preserving every drop of water as per his instructions.

Hale would dry himself off with a relatively standard towel, which he then dropped alongside his pajamas down a chute to be processed in the maintenance quarters. He picked up his folded service garments and donned them, before maneuvering himself upwards and towards his pilot suit, putting that on too. Unsealing the quarters, he would make his way again to the central hallway, this time up and towards the cockpit along the stainless-steel support railing, the dim light of the LEDs again filling his vision like faux stars. It had now been 73 days, 11 hours,and 58 minutes since Hale had entered orbit around the Moon.

As Hale approached the cockpit's hermetically sealed door, it hissed and began to swing open, forcing him to pull down and out of the way to avoid being hit upside the head by the multiple-hundred-pound door. He exchanged an awkward look with Callahan, who cracked a smile and began to chuckle.

"You know there's a big red sticker on that hatch that says, 'KEEP 6.0FT CLEARANCE', right?" he joked.

Hale teased back, half-joking. "You know, you injure me, there's nobody to replace me. You're gonna be workin' shifts til' I'm better."

"Then I might take off early more often. I like it."

"Like what?" Hale inquired.

"Seeing the stars. Seeing the moon. Seeing Earthrise every once in a while, it really fascinates me. You gotta think, like, "What if this is how aliens see things?", you know?"

The only view that the cockpit had of outside space was through a tiny heavily reinforced porthole no more than four inches across. This was the only window on the entire ship. Windows were a pressure liability. Too many windows could risk an implosion. Monitoring of the outside was done through a myriad of instruments and sensors.

"You can't see shit. Half the time, you're staring down at a

grey desert. It's only when we maneuver that you ever get a change of scenery. That's once a week at best. It really entertains you that much?"

Callahan's smile slowly faded from his face as he looked more blankly at Hale. "Why did you even take this job?"

He gruffed briefly, pulling himself up along the bar and towards the entrance of the claustrophobic cockpit, almost shoving past Callahan, who offered little protest. Once his partner was clear of the hatch, he would pull up on it and twist its valve, sealing it shut. Awkwardly, Hale would maneuver into his operator's chair. In front of him, and above him, and to his far right and even towards his back, were countless monitors, dials, instruments, radars, and readings to monitor. On his left were more such switches and buttons, and below him were his emergency weapons controls – they were locked and required a physical key to activate. Also to his left was the single tiny window, offering him a dim view at the Lunar surface, as grey and unchanging as ever before.

He reached down and rigged a tube from the floor of the cockpit to the mask that sat on the console in front of him. He rigged another to his abdomen, and another to his crotch – to regulate temperature and to allow fluid relief on the job respectively. Hale slipped the mask up onto his head, providing him with a heads-up display of the ship's most crucial systems so that they stayed in his view whilst the tube provided him with a consistent supply of oxygen in the event of a loss of atmosphere incident. His job now was to watch and wait.

Hours would go by. Occasionally, Hale would receive pings on the primary radar, though clearly identifiable; a small half meter asteroid on an impact course with empty surface, a known civilian research satellite, and calling beacons from the USSF's surface research bases were among the daily highlights. His eyes scanned the Lunar surface again, hoping to catch a brief glimmer of light, indicating that he may have flown over a landing site or base, the metal outing reflecting the sun off its surface. Why *did* he take this job? The thought, he supposed. He had fallen for a classic bait-and-switch promotional

tactic. He expected to be a war hero. He was a glorified security guard. This was what his entire Space Force career had led up to.

Continuing to watch the dim and dusted surface of Luna, Hale did catch his glimmer. Cresting the horizon, a thin needle of light would pierce his eye for a moment before dissipating as the ship crested its form. Some 3,000 kilometers below him on the horizon was Outpost Washington, a USSF research installation within Mare Nectaris on the near side. He hailed the base, establishing contact with its ground crew as his vessel cruised overhead.

73 days, 16 hours, 54 minutes, and 13 seconds: This was the total duration of Hale's mission when he received a ping on the radar. Breaking his gaze with the satellite, he checked his center console. It was an uncategorized object, about 5,500 klicks out. Hale noticed that the object was closing its distance.

"Okay," he thought. *"Another undiscovered asteroid."* Such things were routine. Hale notified Outpost Washington, as he would with any other impact event.

"OPST WASH ACK – TDRS SNTL USSF CH NON-ID POTENTIAL IMPACTOR DIST 5500 EST IMP DIST 131-76MI NNE CURRENT GPS." The jargon-chocked message took a moment to signal out and issue, with Hale allowing a couple minutes for acknowledgement and response from Washington. Interim, he observed the object's estimated velocity. It was gradually accelerating.

"OPST WASH ACK YES – PRP AND RDY." The base acknowledged their awareness of and readiness for a potential nearby impact within the coming hours.

Hale issued a request for their recommended course of action regarding the velocity change: *"OPST WASH ACK – POTENTIAL IMPACTOR VEL INC EXPO – RCOA."*

"OPST WASH ACK YES – IDENTIFY POS OR NEG."

Washington requested a confirmation attempt of the object's identity and class.

"TDRS SNTL ACK OK." Hale would get right to it.

He glanced over at his primary radar's readings. It was highly reflective, indicating a high percentage composition of metal. Asteroids also didn't accelerate on their own, at least at this rate This wasn't the work of Lunar gravity. Using his console, he would utilize the *Chance Hallman's* IR cameras to observe the object directly. A faint trail of light illuminated one side of it, projecting further in the opposite direction of its heading.

Rocket exhaust. Hale's sighting was confirmed by a message received from a SENTINEL unit opposite the *Hallman* in orbit.

"TDRS SNTL USSF REM ID-D CONFIRMED RKT EXH BEAR DIRECT TO YOU."

Hale got a lock on the vehicle accelerating gradually towards both the *Hallman* and Outpost Washington. He went through the standard procedure for establishing communications with satellites, expecting the vessel to be something like a space telescope adjusting its orbit. Again, this was routine–though its lack of recorded identification still seemed bizarre to him. His ping went unanswered. He pinged the vessel again. No response.

If this were a satellite of any standard type, Hale would have received automated acknowledgement from its flight systems upon receiving the ping, if nothing more. If the satellite's beacon didn't respond to a ping, his only other option was to hope that there was an occupant. Utilizing the SENTINEL's powerful communications array, he would manage to deliver a message on the rocket's operating frequencies:

"This is United States Space Force SENTINEL Station *Chance*

Hallman, identify." Again, Hale's attempts to contact the craft went unanswered. "Repeat: This is United State Space Force SENTINEL Station *Chance Hallman,* identify."

After seconds of silence, just as Hale would prepare to repeat himself a third and final time, the *Chance Hallman* would finally receive a highly static transmission from the vessel, though Hale could not identify any speech. Someone on the other end, though, *had* heard him.

"Unidentified vessel, this is Carter Hale of the USSF SENTINEL Station *Chance Hallman.* At present, we are receiving no identification beacon ping from your vessel. You are currently on a trajectory set to impact Mare Nectaris within fifteen minutes. Adjust course immediately."

Hale would begin to sweat slightly. He felt his chest tense a little and his hands tremored over his communications equipment as he anticipated a response – physical or verbal – from the vessel. He repeated his transmission once more. He received no further response. Minutes later, the flight computers to his right began to light up; the ship was adjusting course, but not away from the surface. He could only watch on IR as the vessel's RCS systems began to shift it. Its pixelated and obscure oblong shape tumbled across his screen, still thousands of kilometers distant, before the ship again ignited its engines, characterized by the flood of bright white on the IR camera pointing towards the *Hallman.* Its estimated trajectory now placed it directly atop the Washington site. Hale reached for the key corded to his thigh, fumbling it in his fingers before inserting it into the keyhole and turning it.

The controls below him freed up; the pedals would unlock, allowing for full operation of the ship's weapon systems. An alarm sounded in the cockpit; two loud wails, indicating that the SENTINEL's defenses were online. The opposing vessel began its deceleration towards the surface as Hale obtained a lock on its exhaust. Pressing the left pedal with his left foot, he confirmed the lock, and the SENTINEL system began maneuvering to align itself with the lander. He pressed the

right pedal with his right foot. *Click. Thunk.* A KKV freed itself from its stowage, detaching from the *Chance Hallman* before beginning to accelerate blisteringly towards the target.

As the missile began to cruise through space towards its target, Hale frantically messaged Washington to alert them of the imminent lander. The missile began to close its distance. *Three thousand klicks. Two thousand. Five hundred. Two hundred.* It released itself from its sabot vehicle, igniting its final-stage solid rocket booster. Continuing to track the vessel on IR, Hale would witness its point-defense systems—powerful automatic anti-missile systems--activate, spewing a stream of thousands of high velocity depleted uranium rounds towards the KKV as it made its final acceleration towards the ship. There was a flash.

The glittery debris would obscure his view, before starting to clear on Hale's IR screen. The vessel was intact. The KKV was nowhere to be seen. Hale again locked onto the vessel, firing another KKV at it, though time was running short. The ship was six minutes to the surface. He observed the same waltz of events in the void: the missile firing, its sabot splitting off, and its kill approach thwarted. Hale fired off yet another kill vehicle towards the landing craft. The *Chance Hallman's* alert systems lit up as Hale caught the flash of not one, but two missiles fired off by the vessel towards his ship. The characteristic color and structure of the flame was visible through Hale's tiny porthole, characteristic of a specific type of rocket fuel, UDMH, utilized only by rockets operated by the Union of Sovereign States.

The *Hallman's* launch detection system automatically sent the ship into defensive mode. Hale, and undoubtedly Callahan as well, would feel the ship vibrate and hear the groan of metal and whir of servo motors as the ship's sole point-defense gun would activate itself. Hale could only brace as he lost partial control of the *Hallman*, its RCS systems positioning the gun towards the incoming missiles. They closed their distance just as rapidly as Hale's had, and the gun began to fire. Tracers lit up Hale's porthole as he frantically attempted to regain control of the ship. His feet slotted back into his weapon controls. A bright flash and cloud of shimmering dust, followed by several loud

sounds of debris colliding with the hull of the *Hallman*, indicated that one missile was down. Another spew of bullets, another shower of glitter; the second was destroyed.

Hale took a moment to collect himself, letting out a loud sigh of relief as the auto-defense system would re-relinquish control to him. As calmly as he could, he reoriented the SENTINEL, firing the remaining three KKVs off at the vessel. Hale's fear was replaced with rage as the three missiles careened their way towards the landing vessel, now only hundreds of kilometers from the Lunar surface. The enemy's point-defense systems lit up again.

The tracers danced across the void in eerie silence. One would hit a missile, destroying it. Hale pounded his fist on the side of the cockpit, bruising his flesh against a set of protruding switches as he winced. A second missile swerved around the debris cloud of the first, narrowly avoiding self-destruction. The vessel's guns locked on, leading their shots well to strike the weapon, which they eventually would, disintegrating it.

The third continued towards the ship. Its point-defense guns fired in small bursts ahead of its path, desperately attempting to hit the KKV. It would land a hit, but not before the missile had made a close enough approach to the landing craft that its engines would receive critical damage in the detonation. Hale's tension eased as the rocket exhaust went dark. Shakily, he removed his fist from against the wall, setting it down onto his lap, staining his jumpsuit with blood as he reclined back into his pilot's chair, staring out the cockpit porthole at the Lunar surface and holding his breath with contempt as he witnessed what would follow.

The foreign vessel, unable to slow or control its descent, would tumble. It continued to accelerate slowly as Luna's weak gravity beckoned it ever closer to Outpost Washington. The slug of metal would impact moments later. The remaining fuel would ignite upon impact, together with the kinetic energy surely levelling large portions of the base. All of this, from Hale's perspective, appeared as a single brief flash

of light, briefly altering the monotony of the dust as debris shot from the site into the sky, re-impacting the surface moments later. Minutes followed; the site disappeared from Hale's view as the SENTINEL continued to orbit the Moon. The *Chance Hallman* received pings from other SENTINEL units, from bases on the Lunar surface, and from Earth, inquiring about the detected missile launches and the loss of signal from Washington.

Hale received an alert on his center console.

"STRATEGIC LAUNCH DETECTED BEARING RELATIVE TO USS STATION TSIOLOKOVSKY – BRACE."

Hale would disable the *Hallman's* flight systems and watch the stars out of the porthole window as they sailed towards each other and the Lunar surface lit up with fire. 73 days, 16 hours, 18 minutes, and 41 seconds: This was the final duration of Captain Carter Hale's mission aboard the USSF *Chance Hallman*.

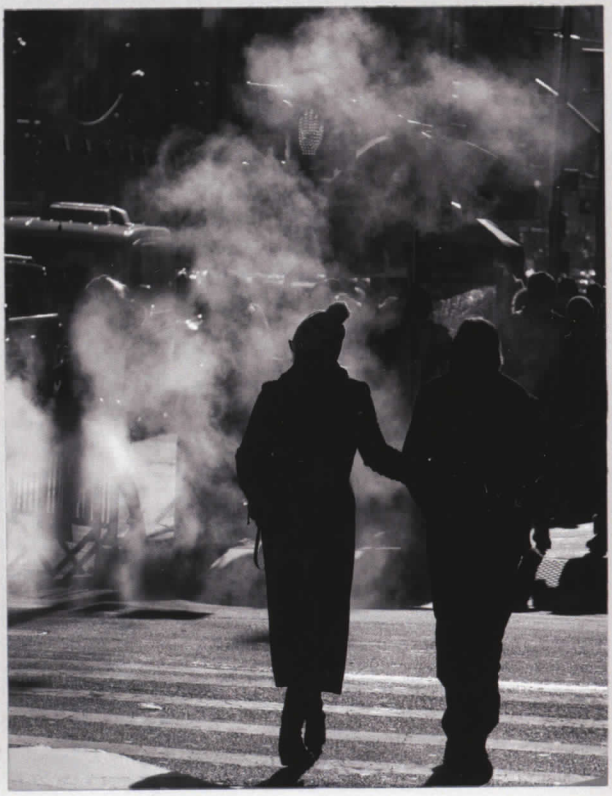
PHOENIX RISING

AIDAN BITTO

In order to rise from its own ashes...

It's Not Polite To Stare

Caden Yonish



Don't cross

Travis Loewe

Could be worse

Robin Lyons

POV: Are Your Dead?

Cassie Sheridan

Unreleasable

Samantha Salazar

Location, Location, Location

Emily Brophy

Shadow

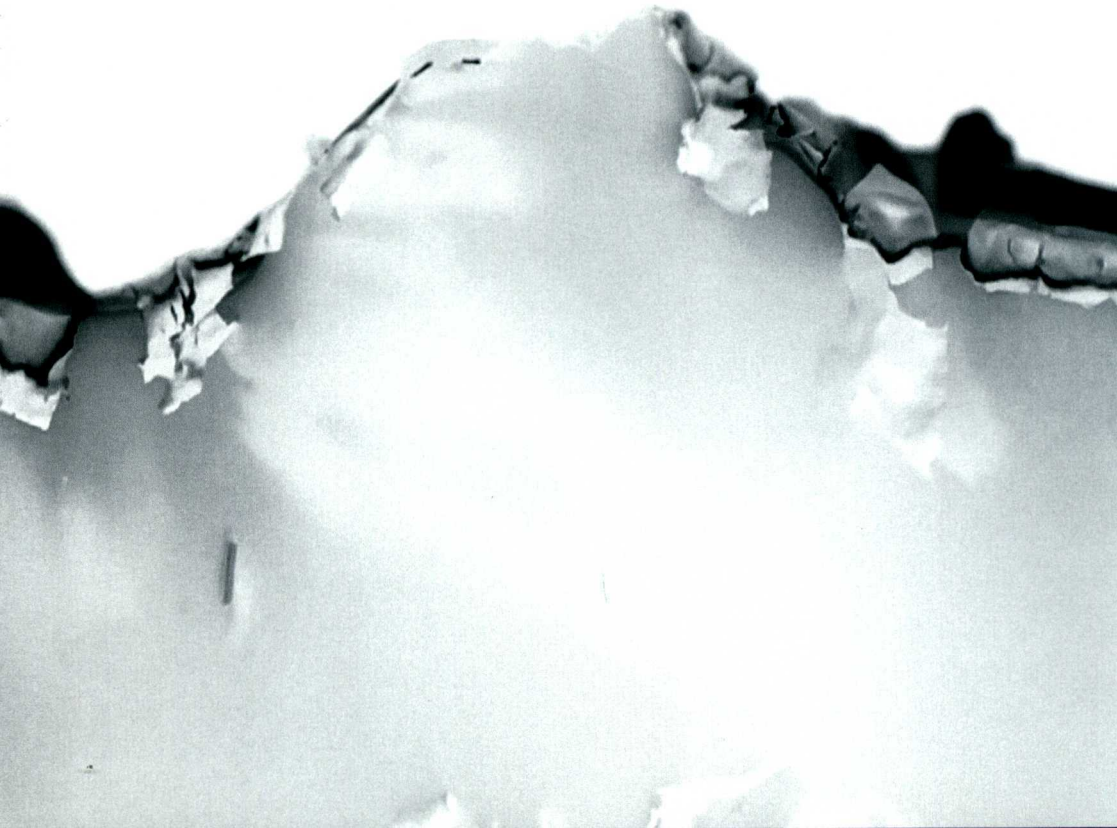
Samantha Salazar

Carcass Water

Trinity Gomez

... a Phoenix first must burn.

- Octavia Butler



MIDNIGHT PAINTING MISTAKES

BY ASHLEY LYONS

Henry liked to paint landscapes in the dark. He suspected he preferred dim imagery because it was easier—nothing had to be precise, it just had to be. He enjoyed defining shapes by their tiny highlights, especially on nights like this, when it had recently rained, and humidity hung in the air like a blanket. He sat on his porch, his canvas propped on his wobbly easel, the weak porch light flickering as bugs flew around it, blocking its faint glow. Gently, he used a thin brush to dot a pale yellow onto his painted interpretation of the street before him, currently an amalgamation of dark blues and blacks nearly indistinguishable from each other. The asphalt sparkled under the sparse streetlights, a reflection of the star-speckled sky. Henry couldn't do the scene justice, but he didn't quite care. Painting was just a hobby, after all. And the darkness of the shapes masked their imperfections.

He leaned close to the canvas to carefully sketch the darkness of a cluster of leaves against the darkness of the sky. He'd almost configured the paint into a series of shapes he was content with when a noise startled him. His hand twitched, smearing the paint into a nearly indiscernible mess that he'd have to fix. Again.

He couldn't see anything amiss in the landscape in front of him, and he was tempted to return to his painting, but he heard a second crash, which seemed closer than the first, followed by a high-pitched wail that could mean nothing other than extreme pain. Henry couldn't ignore it, so he stood and shuffled down the creaky porch stairs.

From the side of the road, he could see a faint glow from the left, illuminating the front three rows of tress in the expanse of forest extended from the street. It shifted, its warmth spreading and receding in a chaotic manner. Henry didn't know much about emergencies, but he knew not to approach a car on fire. He knew it could explode, and he could die too. He knew he was supposed to call 911, but his phone was inside. Did he leave it in the kitchen or the living room? He was afraid that if he looked away from the faint smudge of disaster, it would

disappear.

A dark shape emerged from the car's burning corpse, a shadow against a bright backdrop. If Henry painted well-lit scenery, he thought he might like to paint it. The shape stumbled away from the flames, and he rushed forward to meet it.

"Are you alright?" Henry asked.

The shape was a girl with broken glass in her hair and wide pupils and blood running down her face in streaks. Henry thought that his question was unhelpful, as she could not possibly be alright.

She opened her mouth, but the sound seemed delayed. "What?"

"I heard the accident. You're probably injured. The crash looked bad. You need to go to a hospital."

Her eyes wandered, so wide he could see the red whites all around her narrow irises, dark and nearly indistinguishable from her pupils. She seemed to drink in her surroundings like he did.

"Do you have a phone? I left mine inside. That's not important. You need help. Can you give me your phone?"

"I don't want to go anywhere. Right here is so beautiful. So beautiful. I've never seen the woods before."

Her voiced was crushed velvet—soft but rough, halting as she searched for words. Maybe she was struggling to speak. Henry didn't know much about medicine, but he knew that meant she could have a brain injury.

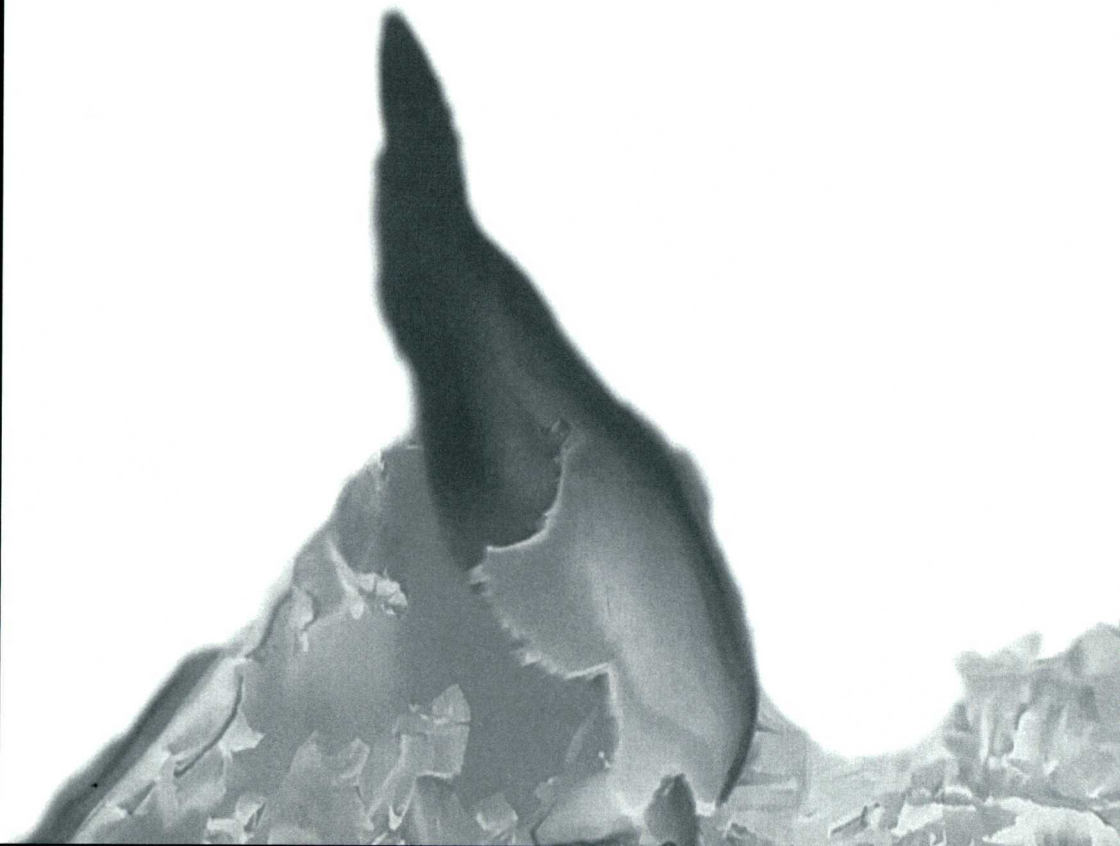
"You need to go to a hospital as soon as possible. They can help you. Please just give me your phone."

"I want to stay here. Sit with me."

She attempted to sit on the side of the road, but she instead performed something closer to collapse, her legs folding beneath her like they were simply tired of holding her weight. Her hair was fanned over the ground beneath her, obscuring the gleam of the saturated pavement. She stared into the sky for a few moments, but gently, she shut her eyes, as if she didn't want to stop observing the scenery. Henry knew that people with head injuries shouldn't go to sleep.

He fumbled through her pockets until he found her phone, which her used to dial the shortest phone number he knew. He watched her chest rise and fall slowly until the warm light of the fiery car was overpowering by the flashing red and blue. The EMTs told him he did well, he probably saved her life. They left him behind with her phone clutched in his hand, the car's fire extinguished, its wrecked body towed.

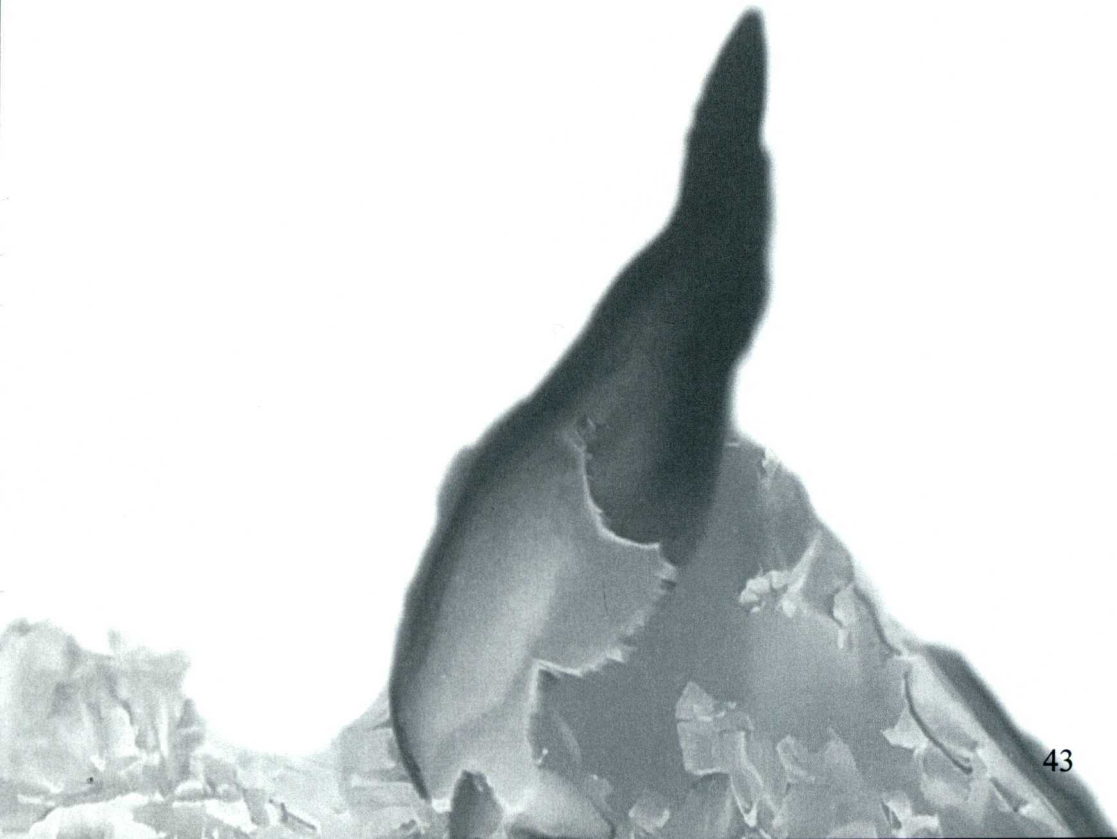
It was late now, and darker than Henry's usual painting hours. He sat back behind his easel, erasing his stray lines from earlier, his subject even more indistinct than before.



SARDINES

BY CAROLINE HONSEL

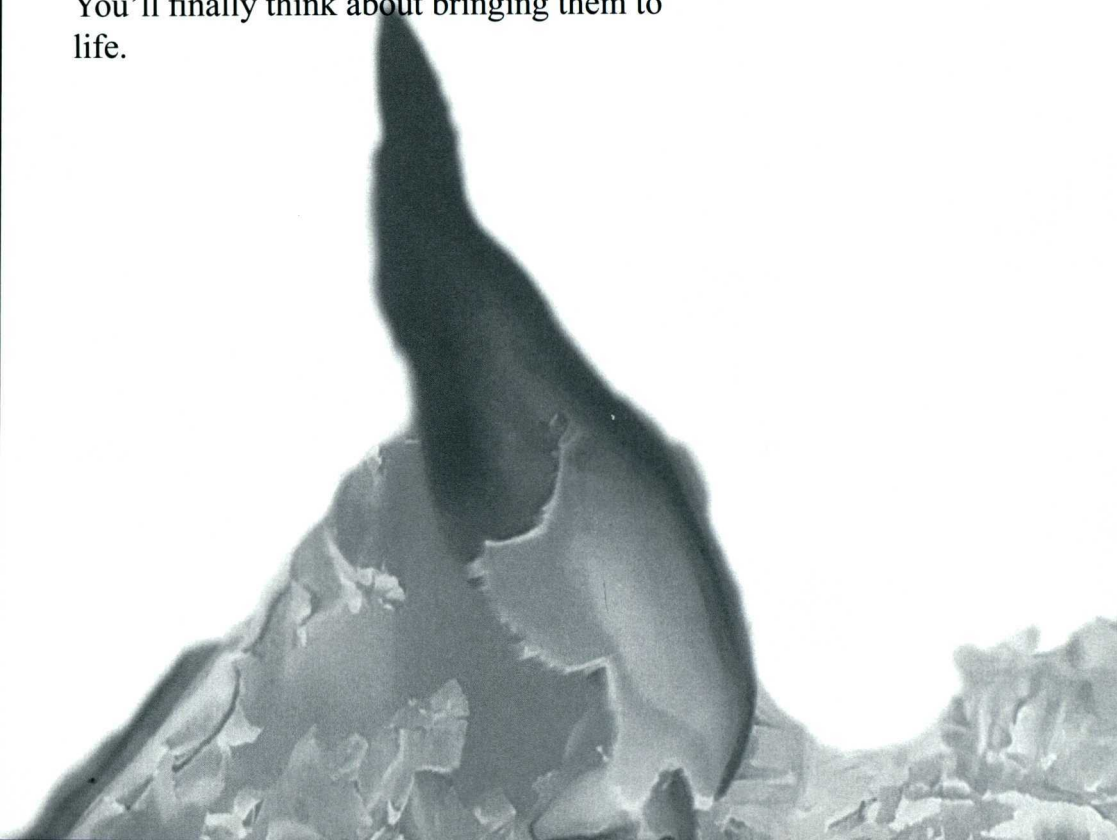
How come I have spent so long trying to go back?
Always safe and always dark—no one cared to look inside.
Sweetness wrapped our syrupy bodies in layers of warmth.
We were not the same—it did not matter. My hair
slicked with oil, thin arms that wrap around them. Smooth
skin against their soft scales never seemed to be a bother.
That was, until you opened us up. You opened my tin
and started pulling out my friends. You used a
knife to chop off their little heads. Soft, crunchy
scales scraped away to expose their empty bellies.
You picked me up by my ankles and wiggled me about,
full of life that you did not expect. Regardless—
I have been a little girl for far too long.
I wonder—how much of myself was still in my can?
I am twenty-two and I still tear at the skin around my nails.



FRUITS OF A DYING FLOWER

BY MATTHEW CIVITELLA

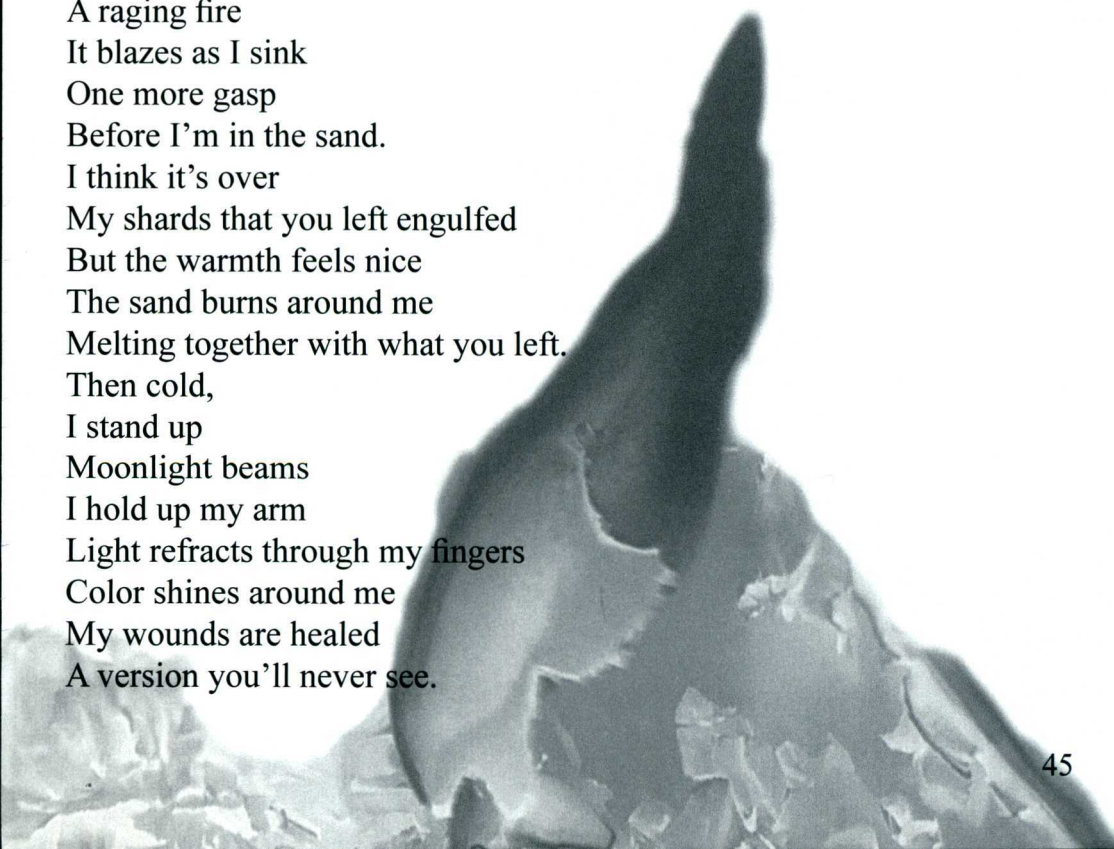
How I whittle down
As the time rushes by
My seeds you leave unattended
I think this time I should not supply the fertilizer
Watch you break the lives I handed you.
I will watch winter be set ablaze
Seedlings I have propagated for my own enjoyment
They will bloom by my hand
Spring sun supplying them with energy.
Flowers I'll sit with as spring turns into summer
Proud of how I grew new life
Alone yet beautiful.
Fall will come and I think I have forgotten
But the fruits have grown and I wonder
If you'll come to pick them.
Maybe next winter when new seeds are mine,
You'll finally think about bringing them to
life.



STAINED GLASS REFLECTION

BY MATTHEW CIVITELLA

You leave me stranded
Endless seas of sand
A deserted prison
For the shards of myself
The winds try to bury me alive
Vultures circling high.
But you forgot
In critical conditions
Resilience is formed
Weather worsens
Cacti stand tall
I try the same
Refuse to fall.
It's getting worse
The heat is rising
I look behind me
A raging fire
It blazes as I sink
One more gasp
Before I'm in the sand.
I think it's over
My shards that you left engulfed
But the warmth feels nice
The sand burns around me
Melting together with what you left.
Then cold,
I stand up
Moonlight beams
I hold up my arm
Light refracts through my fingers
Color shines around me
My wounds are healed
A version you'll never see.



ASPHALT

BY CHARLIE ROLLER

Conversation across the Asphalt:

"What was your life before?" asks the squashed bug.

"It was…fulfilling" says the roadkill.

"When do you think they'll come to pick us up?"

"Oh me? Probably in a few days. They tend to leave us here, let children gasp and cry while my guts dry out on the pavement. But you? They won't come for you"

"What do you mean? Why not?"

"You're a bug. You get killed very often. You're little."

"But I had big ideas and big dream!"

"They don't care. That's why they're more worried about their grill and the bottoms of their shoes than us."

"Will you hold me?"

"I'm stuck and you are too. Even if I could, you're too damn little."

"Well, will you talk to me before it's over?"

"Sure kid. What do you want to talk about?"

"Them. Those selfish bastards! They stomp and shoot and hurt us and they don't care!"

"We are simply beneath them."

"But they're going to end up here too!"

"Yes. They rush from place to place, as if they're blind. They see us fall, they let us die, yet never pause to realize they will be us."

"Only in death will they realize they are the same as some dead animal."

...From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
a light from the shadows shall spring...
- J. R. R. Tolkien

COLOPHON

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Next year's theme...

CONSENT

Police ignored my complaints about him.

Can I kiss you?

I didn't know he took my wallet out my bag.

Those seals didn't want plastic in their ocean.

Submit to: leslee.blahut@delval.edu